

Farewell Sir Ian Thompson



photograph of Thompson family - from *Fiji Times*.

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Peceli told me that he had met Ian Thompson and that in the colonial era he was a very fine man in Fiji. He was a District Officer one time in Labasa.

from a feature article in the *Fiji Times*:

Moce Turaga Saturday, March 22, 2008

Sir Ian Thomson, who is being buried in Scotland today, was a proud Scot but a large part of his heart belonged to Fiji and especially the Fijian people. He commanded Fijian troops in the Solomons in World War II, was fluent in the Fijian language and would later spend a significant part of his career protecting Fijian interests on the Native Land Trust Board. He was a man who believed firmly in a multi-racial Fiji and dedicated himself to defending the interests of Fiji-Indian cane farmers as independent head of the sugar industry. When the annals of the decades leading to Fiji's independence and subsequently fall to be written, John Sutherland Thomson's contribution to nation building will feature prominently.

It is two decades since Sir Ian (as he was widely known) left these shores, and there is now a generation "which knew not Joseph" in the words of Exodus.

His death, aged 88, in Scotland on March 13, 2008, marks the end of cherished bonds of affection between Sir Ian and his adopted homeland spanning nearly 70 years.

Arriving in Fiji as a 21-year-old year old, Sir Ian was to spend most of the next 45 years in these islands.

Initially serving as aide de camp to the then Governor, Sir Harry Luke, Sir Ian saw action in the

Solomon Islands campaign with Fijian soldiers as a commissioned officer. There, he was decorated for bravery. It heralded the beginning of a close and intimate relationship with the Fijian people. One that was reciprocated in full measure.

After World War II, Sir Ian served in parts of Fiji in the District Administration. He had strengthened his ties further to these islands by marrying Nancy Kearsley, a fourth generation member of a prominent local European family. It was a union of kindred spirits and the bedrock of Sir Ian's life, together with a quiet Christian faith. They were to have seven sons and one daughter, now scattered all over the globe who yet carry with them the vexing ambivalence of memories and reminiscences common in Fiji's diaspora.

As a district officer and eventually district commissioner, Sir Ian was closely involved with development in parts of the country. Serving in Kadavu, Lomaiviti and Vanua Levu, Sir Ian had a rapport with the local communities.

His son Peter would follow in his stead. Fluent in Fijian with a smattering of Hindi, Sir Ian personified the best in the British colonial civil servant.

In manner and bearing he was princely, with an approachability that was as reassuring as it was genuine. It was complemented by a voice that evoked dignity and gravitas.

Among Fijians, Sir Ian was said to embody 'nai vakarau vakaturaga', the chiefly manner asserted by so many yet practiced by only a few.

A critical part of Sir Ian's reputation for effectiveness, was the enduring friendships he had with Fijian leaders of the time. Ratu Sir Lala, Ratu George Cokanauto, Ratu Josefa Lalabalavu and Ratu Tevita Uluilakeba, among others, as well as emerging successors like Ratu Mara, Ratu George Cakobau, Ratu Edward Cakobau and Ratu Penaia Ganilau, valued his counsel and companionship. To Ratu Penaia in particular, he was like a brother. Sir Ian was his best man when he married his first wife Laisa in 1947. Many a convivial evening was spent with the Ganilaus at either their home in Suva or in 'Vuniduva' at Somosomo. It would inevitably end with the singing of Scottish folksongs like Early One Morning and Loch Lomond.

Sir Ian's standing in the colonial administration and his Kearsley connections gave him ready entry into local European circles.

Part-Europeans like Fred Archibald counted among his friends. He was respected by the likes of Pandit Vishnu Deo, Pandit Ajodhya Prasad, Swami Rudrananda and Mr A D Patel for his sense of fairness and integrity. It was what struck people most about him.

On the death of Ratu Sir Lala in 1958, Sir Ian succeeded him as chairman of the Native Lands Commission. It was a measure of his familiarity with things Fijian and the confidence reposed in him, both by the colonial administration and the Fijian chiefs, that he acceded to a position Ratu Sir Lala had made his own. In this capacity, he continued and completed much of the records

and detailing of boundaries his predecessor had embarked upon. It was all done in the understated style that was his *modus operandi*.

In the years immediately preceding independence, Sir Ian was Assistant Chief Secretary and acted as Chief Secretary on several occasions. He contributed to the smooth transition to independence by encouraging dialogue, a message reinforced by the confidence he enjoyed among Fiji's political leaders. In this process, he was the perfect foil for the Governor, Sir Derek Jakeway, who had a prickly relationship with Ratu Mara.

The untold story of his role in providing advice to Ratu Mara, Ratu Edward and Ratu Penaia may never be widely known, as the protagonists are no longer with us.

If Sir Ian was concerned about the sudden abolition of the *Lawa i Taukei* (or Native Regulations) in 1967, which gave Fijians *galala* or freedom overnight, he was too much of a gentleman to show askance. His innate caution and tutelage under Ratu Sir Lala, would have inclined him to a more gradualist approach. The irony must have struck him when he headed a *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* inquiry several years after 1987. It considered how chiefs in general, and young chiefs in particular, might be given more training for national leadership. *Galala* had accelerated the populist nature of the times. It was difficult, if not impossible, to put the genie back in the bottle.

After a short period in the British Virgin Islands, Sir Ian returned to Fiji to be independent chairman of the Sugar industry. He was to occupy the position for nearly a decade and a half. These were the golden years of the sugar industry. Repositioning it in the wake of the departure of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company, the dynamism of Rasheed Ali and his colleagues at the Fiji Sugar Corporation, co-operation of the cane farming organisations, political stability provided by Ratu Mara's leadership and the wise stewardship of Sir Ian was a formula for success.

A critical element was his facility in dealing with all communities and the regard they had for him as an honest broker. In this period, he served on other statutory entities as well. He was knighted for his record of public service in 1984.

In well deserved retirement, Sir Ian was able to spend more time with Lady Thomson. However, her ill health and deteriorating condition, obliged them to leave the country that had been his home for nearly half a century. Lady Thomson died two years later in 1988. Sir Ian's grief and loss can only be imagined, for he was a private person despite his public profile. Sir Ian subsequently remarried and the second Lady Thomson survives him.

In a very real sense, Sir Ian left this country at the right time. A year later, the cycle of coups began.

Although he would have understood Fijian insecurities, the British sense of justice and fairplay that was second nature would have caused Sir Ian profound hurt.

Peter, his son, was to become a casualty of the second coup in September, 1987.

Ratu Sir Penaia's poignantly piercing observation to the latter as he took his leave, about the divide between himself as 'an outsider' and the Fijian people, would have cut Sir Ian deeply. It delineated the fault lines at the core of Fiji's ethnic realities, defying the enduring ties between them. But Sir Ian would never have dwelt on it given his generous nature. True friendships bear all things, and the Fijian statesman was reflecting sentiments embedded deep in the Fijian psyche. Sir Ian would have understood that and, recognising the love of one's country encompasses both the good and the difficult, he nevertheless continued to hold Fiji firmly in his heart to the end.

Posted by Peceli and Wendy's Blog at [6:08 PM](#)

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